

# UNDERAGE DRINKING

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Alcohol, especially in the form of beer, is the most abused *legal* drug among adolescents. Though legal for use by adults, the purchase, possession, and use of alcohol by minors (persons under the age of 21) is illegal in Missouri and most other states.

That hasn't stopped more than half of Missouri's high-school seniors from admitting, when surveyed recently, that they have had an alcoholic beverage. According to the *2000 Missouri Student Survey*, 33 percent of Missouri high-school seniors reported binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks during one drinking occasion) at least once during the two weeks prior to the survey. In the *Monitor The Future Survey* for 2000, 30 percent of high-school seniors nationwide reported binge drinking at least once during the two weeks prior to the survey.

The problem of underage drinking in Missouri often does not begin in high school. By 8th grade, 56 percent of the students have tried alcohol. It is thought that more than 80 percent of Missouri students will have tried alcohol by the time they finish the 12th grade.

### ▼ The Role of Adults

It's not surprising, therefore, that Missouri school children tell researchers that their attitudes toward drinking are shaped more by what they see at home than from what they hear and see among their peers. A majority of them said their first experience with alcohol was at home in the presence of their parents.

Drinking is seen as an adult activity by adolescents and drinking is a way to appear older, more mature, or "cool" among friends. Peer pressure plays a big role. But adults play a bigger role, for somewhere along the way, an adult has to make it possible for an adolescent or teenager to obtain what they cannot obtain legally on their own — whether it is an unscrupulous merchant who sells it, the adult friend who shows off by buying it, or the uncaring or unthinking parent who provides it.

### ▼ Tragic Results

The consequences of underage drinking are often tragic. Alcohol often plays a role in the three leading causes of deaths of teenagers and young adults: motor vehicle crashes, homicides, and suicides.

If the underage drinker escapes immediate death or harm, there are long-range effects to worry about. Studies show the younger a person starts to drink, the more likely the person is to become dependent on alcohol. Especially worrisome to prevention and treatment professionals is the tendency of underage drinkers to drink to excess each time they drink, leading to passing out and blackouts (inability to recall or remember personal actions while intoxicated).

Adolescents who drink are at special risk because their bodies are still developing. Excessive drinking can arrest or delay development of a young person's sexual organs and characteristics. It also can cause damage to brain cells that

research has linked to the development of alcoholism in persons not already hereditarily prone to the disease.

### ▼ What to Do?

What can parents do? Community 2000 teams in many towns and cities have enlisted the help of parents to pledge not to make alcohol available to each other's children, while other groups have solicited similar pledges from local merchants not to sell to minors. Still other groups have lobbied to have laws against underage drinking strengthened and enforced.

### ▼ Further Reading

For additional information on this and other related topics, visit the websites of the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse ([www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)), and the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, NCADI, ([www.health.org](http://www.health.org)).



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*Sources: Status Report on Missouri's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Problems, January 1998;  
Missouri Youth Risk Behavior Survey, February, 1998*